

## Civil War Book Review

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### The Afterlives of Specimens: Science, Mourning, and Whitman's Civil War

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## Review

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**Tuggle, Lindsay.** *The Afterlives of Specimens: Science, Mourning, and Whitman's Civil War*. University of Iowa Press, \$65.00 ISBN 9781609385392

Lindsay Tuggle's *The Afterlives of Specimens* offers a provocative, interdisciplinary analysis of Walt Whitman's Civil War writings that examines the intersection of science and cultural mourning practices in a literary frame. Tuggle posits that Whitman's books collected and commemorated soldiers in ways deeply influenced by nineteenth-century practices of botany, medicine, autopsy, embalming, and museum curation, the histories of which she explores with good specific evidence. She also provides new readings of *Leaves of Grass* and some of Whitman's prose using theoretical apparatus provided by Nicholas Abraham, Judith Butler, Jacques Derrida, Sigmund Freud, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Maria Took. Tuggle argues that "Whitman's specimens inhabit the threshold between scientific exploration and melancholic attachment, embodying the intimacy of mourning in the face of anonymity and dismemberment (9)."

The arguments in Tuggle's book are complex, but she lays them out in very well-organized chapters that each develop a discrete theme. Chapter one examines Whitman's ideas about evolution and death and reads his early poetry against the backdrop of the growth of medical knowledge in antebellum America, which depended on body snatching and an excess of postmortem decay in New York City. Chapter two examines the parallel wartime experiences of Whitman and John H. Brinton, founder of the Army Medical Museum, and Tuggle examines "the contrasting collections (literary and medical) that preserved the 'human fragments' of soldiers (22)."

Chapter three explores mourning for the tens of thousands of limbs amputated in the Civil War by juxtaposing Whitman and the physician Silas Wier Mitchell, both of whom focused on "phantom" limbs and how men coped with bodily absence. Chapter four explores the science of embalming and its effect on widespread mourning for Abraham Lincoln, offering a reading of

Whitman's elegies as a means of preserving the dead. Chapter four also likens Whitman's processes of revision and republication of his war poetry to the repatriation and reburial of Union soldiers' dead bodies.

In her final chapter, Tuggle shifts focus to Whitman himself and examines connections between the "deathbed edition" of *Leaves of Grass* (1891-92) and Whitman's own death and autopsy. Both played a role in Whitman's literary celebrity, and Tuggle relates how Whitman's biographer and executor Horace Traubel extended the ethic of bodily specimen collection to Whitman himself as part of his literary canonization.

*The Afterlives of Specimens* presents historical material, backed up by impressive primary source research and integrates it well with theoretically informed readings of Whitman's poetry. Interdisciplinarity infuses every chapter, which means that any reader not fully versed in science, medicine, history, poetry, and literary theory will have to stretch. Tuggle herself acknowledges: "my structural approach may not be immediately intuitive to readers from different fields (21)." But the mental exercise required is worth it, as Tuggle brings together disparate fields in interesting ways and always keeps Whitman at the center.

Tuggle integrates sexuality into her analysis in particularly effective and subtle ways. She uses Whitman's ecoeroticism as an effective connection between his scientific interests in nature and botany and his embodied writings. Added to this, Tuggle ties Whitman's sexual connection to soldiers and the homoerotic space of the Civil War hospital very effectively to the work of the Army Medical Museum—which housed specimens of the deceased bodies of several soldiers Whitman commemorated in writing. Tuggle demonstrates with great clarity how erotic melancholy influenced Whitman, and probably a good many other Americans in the post-war period.

Especially given that so very much has been written about Whitman and about the Civil War by both historians and literary scholars, it is impressive that Tuggle manages to shed new light on both. She also provides essential detail about some topics that have long deserved more attention, such as John H. Brinton and the Army Medical Museum. Many different scholars will find themselves interested in Tuggle's insights, even if historians and literary scholars are not equally drawn to all aspects of her interpretation.

*Sarah J. Purcell is the L.F. Parker Professor of History at Grinnell College. She is the author of Sealed with Blood: War, Sacrifice, and Memory in Revolutionary America (2002) and the forthcoming Spectacle of Grief: Public Funerals and the Politics of Civil War Memory.*